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ABSTRACT

Writing centers have to adapt their philosophies to meet challenges that are unique to individual institutions. Working with faculty in other disciplines inevitably brings changes in what writing centers do, creating a need for some adaptation in the way a center operates--on at least a practical, day-to-day level. The greatest challenge is to find practical means of fostering the growth necessary to achieve the ideal. It is fortuitous that Stephen North's essay (1994) and Muriel Harris' essay (1995) appeared in mailboxes at nearly the same time because while North tries to shake what is left of the comfortable assurance that writing centers know what they are about, Harris looks past the proliferation of things writing centers do to discover their unique function, their valuable contribution to education now and in the longed-for, transcendent future. Among North's major points is that writing centers hamper their own growth by adhering to flawed, idealistic images of themselves. Writing centers, he suggests, are more likely to be coopted by than to change their institutions. In contrast, Harris believes that transforming the institution is part of the writing center's job and goal. These essays suggest that writing center administrators need to become less rigid or less defensive in their advocacy of their ideals. They might begin to do that by talking to those who stand between the theory and the daily demands of the writing center, the tutors. (Contains six references.) (TB)

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"Walking the Tightrope: Negotiating Between the Ideal and the Practical in the Writing Center, Part 2: The Real"

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Collaborative theory and the idealizations of the writing center which it has fostered have played an important role in distancing today's writing centers from the remedial centers of the past. This distancing of new ideals/new practices from old ideals/old practices is a standard part of establishing new movements in the academy. It has been the means by which writing centers have taken control of defining their own identity and by which they have created a space in which to strive to achieve their ideal. Thus, in part, this distancing is common, necessary, and beneficial. But it can also lead to a rigidity in our concept of the writing center, setting at odds the ideal and the real in writing center practice.

One of the points that we are interested in making in this session today is that writing centers have to adapt their philosophies to meet challenges that are unique to individual institutions and have to adapt to meet new challenges that will arise as we work with faculties across the various disciplines, starting conversations about the nature of teaching and the role of writing in education. Will those adaptations be strategic adjustments or a form of selling out our principles? Too often adaptations are hastily branded as "selling out." Working with faculty in other disciplines inevitably brings changes in what writing centers do, creating the need for some adaptation in the way a center operates--on <u>at least</u> a practical, day-to-day level. Consequently, it should involve us in thinking about who we are, just as we press faculty in our institutions to rethink what are for so many of them fixed concepts of appropriate pedagogy and of their role as teachers. We need to recognize that our greatest challenge is not actually to uphold or to articulate an ideal but to find practical means to foster the growth necessary to achieve the ideal.

Since Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" was published in 1984, there have been many calls to recognize the reality and the necessity

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of writing centers' adapting to local conditions. They have in common an air of reassurance, as if to say essentially that it is okay to deviate from the ideal articulated in North's 1984 essay. For this reason alone, it is helpful that North himself, in the essay "Revisiting 'The Idea of the Writing Center'" published in *Writing Center Journal* (*WCJ*)in Fall 1994, has questioned his earlier essay and spoken of the need to re-examine, revise, reinvent our idea of a writing center:

> ["The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984)] offered a version of what we do that is, in its own way, very attractive; but one which also, to the extent that it is a romantic idealization, presents its own kind of jeopardy. . . . More to the point here, it has come back—a highly visible version of our mythology, a public idealization—to haunt us. . . . [W]e are bound by "The Idea of a Writing Center" to the extent to which we have endorsed it: asked training tutors to read it, cited it. . . . And there is plenty of evidence, I think, that we have indeed endorsed it . . . in ways that make it harder for us to disown or renounce what may be its less desirable legacies. (9)

It is fortuitous that North's "Revisiting" essay in *WCJ* and Muriel Harris' essay on tutoring in the January 1995 *College English* appeared in mailboxes at nearly the same time because North tries to shake what's left of our comfortable assurance that we know who we are as writing centers and Harris suggests that we look past the confusing proliferation of things writing centers do to find something distinctive that would define us as a unique, valuable part of education both now and in that longed-for, transcendent future when our institutions have been transformed into what we would wish them to be.

Now it may be assuming a lot to assume that there is a <u>single</u> way that writing centers would wish higher education to be, not dozens of different ways. But the rapidity of our adopting North's 1984 essay as, in his words, our "mythology" or our "public idealization" of ourselves, is powerful evidence of our sharing some commonalty of view independent of our local differences and it is evidence of his 1984 essay's having captured the essence of that view--even if imperfectly as he suggests now.

North sets his "Revising" essay in the context of a deconstructionist reading of the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society* as a "grandiose, idealized" vision of teaching that ends with an illusion of triumph and that poses a danger to viewers "especially as [the film's] idealization is allowed to embody expectations" concerning education (9). He proceeds to try some deconstruction of writing centers and of his 1984 essay as similarly presenting us with dangerous idealizations that we might continue struggling hopelessly to make real, thereby preventing us from recognizing and dealing with the realities we encounter: "I no longer believe that our energies are really best applied trying to live up to--*real*-ize--the rather too grand "Idea" proposed in that earlier essay"(16).

Among the major points of North's provocative "Revisiting" are these:

1) His 1984 "Idea" essay presents flawed or unrealistic images of the center which have been adopted uncritically;
2) Adhering to these images, these idealizations, has hampered writing centers in various ways; and
3) Writing centers are more likely to be co-opted by their institutions than to change them.

It is not possible, of course, in summarizing parts of North's "Revisiting" and in focusing on a few of his ideas to do justice to what is in many ways a complex and tricky essay. But then my purpose today is not really to remake his argument, which I would encourage you to read if you have not yet had the opportunity.

North revisits his earlier images of tutor in relation to writer, tutor in relation to teacher, and tutor in relation to institution. In regard to writers, tutors he says are shocked and distressed to encounter unmotivated and problematically motivated writers instead of the deeply motivated, serious, committed writers that his "Idea" essay and their training have led them to expect (10-11). Similarly his 1984 image of unobtrusive, low-intervention tutoring he now sees as "handcuff[ing]" tutors and as denying the artificiality

of any writing center setting which necessarily makes even the least obtrusive tutoring an "invasion" of the writer's activity (12). Tutors take these images, he says, "pretty much at face value"(11) and encounter troubling difficulties. But, in your experience, how likely are tutor training programs to ignore the challenge of dealing with unmotivated and poorly motivated writers? Or to treat the issue of intervention as an uncomplicated, unchallenging matter? Both have occupied a good deal of our tutors' attention back through 1984, and both have been perennial topics of workshop presentations at regional writing center and national peer tutoring conferences.

In regard to teachers, tutors he says feel a lot of "pressure" and conflict as a result of taking the pledge to refrain from any second-guessing or commentary that teachers might find threatening to their authority (13). It is especially difficult since, he says, tutors hold low status positions in institutions and inevitably encounter bad teaching. He's right. It is frustrating to be unappreciated and caught in the middle between writer and teacher, with or without a pledge of neutrality.

Finally, in regard to tutor and institution, he sees examples of writing centers' successes in becoming "centers of consciousness about writing on campuses" as diminished and illusory due to factors of scale and image. Scale because tutor-student ratios are far too high, especially on very large campuses, for people to "talk with and know one another"(14). Behind this scale issue is, of course, the assumption that every student on campus should work with writing center tutors regularly throughout their time as students. (Muriel Harris works from a very different assumption in her essay.) North sees the image factor as the more serious problem:

> Regardless of the commitment by a writing center staff to reforming the larger institution, the tendency seems not for the center to become the locus of any larger consciousness. On the contrary, there is a very strong tendency for it to become the place whose existence serves simultaneously to locate a wrong-ness (in this case, illiteracy, variously conceived) *in* a set of persons (and in that sense to constitute language differences *as* a wrong-ness); to absolve the institution from further consideration of such persons, in that they

> have now been named ("basic," "remedial," "developmental") and "taken care of"; and, not incidentally, to thereby insulate the institution from any danger to its own configuration the differences such persons are now said to embody might otherwise pose. In short—and to put it in the most sinister terms—this particular romanticization of the writing center's institutional potential may actually mask its complicity in what Elspeth Stuckey has called the violence of literacy. (15)

Basically, he sees the successes that writing centers claim as empty victories, representing no real transformation of the institution but instead a transfer of responsibility for writing issues from the institution to the center so that institutions can feel virtuous about dealing with writing issues while actually avoiding them.

The picture he sketches here is not far from--perhaps would suggest the inevitability of arriving one day at--his facetious 1990 suggestion of a writing center as an indoctrination center for the masses:

> I always considered the role of the writing center was to help the kid be a better writer, but in the context of writing papers the way institutions want them written. Now—always—there's been a tension about that. I haven't always approved . . . but I always thought . . . that it's not up to us in this case. I still train the tutors to think that way, but . . . suppose we decided that the structure was really stupid and should be changed—then what would we do? . . . you know it's an ethical issue of a kind, and I'm not sure who's going to be right. Maybe it would be better to have a big writing center, and everybody who went there then went and wrote papers for courses that we knew about, and we all agreed that this kind of writing is OK; this is what we'll learn to do. If you don't like it, too bad; this is what you're going to learn. You know, it's Sheridan Baker through the writing center. We won't do that, but I can see how somebody could. They could argue that they were doing a lot of good by doing this so their retention rates could go up or something. (Harris and Kinkead, "Interview" 9)

Curiously, or naturally depending on how you choose to view his "Revisiting" essay, North doesn't conclude that writing centers need to reconcile themselves with the bleak realities he presents in this or any other sort of way. What seems at times a harsh rejection of his earlier, romantic idealizations of the writing center turns out to be, instead, a rejection of the essentially unchangeable institutional realities that, in his view, make those idealizations unattainable illusions. He concludes by holding to the romantic idealizations in his 1984 "Idea" and looking to reconceive the writing center within a different set of institutional realities. In other words, he doesn't change the ideals but instead changes where they'll be applied:

> For our purposes [SUNY-Albany], the best way to create this situation is to tie the Center directly to our Writing Sequence through the English major: to make it the center of consciousness, the physical locus—not for the entire, lumbering university—but for the approximately 10 faculty members, the 20 graduate students, and the 250 or so undergraduates that we can actually, sanely, responsibly bring together. They can meet there, and talk about writing. (17)

If the ideal of a group of committed writers struggling and working together just isn't the reality of the institution-wide writing center, maybe it can be the reality of a center limited to committed writers, screened at the door as it were. Instead of a problematic writing center for the masses, a writing center where the elite meet. Maybe it <u>is</u> the best way to deal with the local conditions of a large university.

In contrast, Muriel Harris finds less problematic many of the realities that North highlights, at least partly because she proceeds on the assumption that a serious commitment to writing and a long-term involvement in a cohesive community of writers are not pre-requisites to a writer's profiting--indeed growing as a writer--as a result of a visit to a writing center. She suggests that transforming the institution--and much that goes with that goal--is a secondary function of writing centers and, in the spirit of North's 1984 "Idea," locates the distinctive contribution of writing centers in a tutorial

interaction which empowers writers rather than creates long-term dependency:

> [All of the functions, good work, and accomplishments of writing centers] do not define its core, its primary responsibility—to work one-on-one with writers. In doing so, writing centers do not duplicate, usurp, or supplement writing or writing-across-the-curriculum classrooms. Writing Centers do not and should not repeat the classroom experience and are not there to compensate for poor teaching, overcrowded classrooms, or lack of time for overburdened instructors to confer adequately with their students. Instead, writing centers provide another, very crucial aspect of what writers need—tutorial interaction. When meeting with tutors, writers gain kinds of knowledge about their writing and about themselves that are not possible in other institutionalized settings. (Harris, 27)

Working from Louise Phelps's discussion of two kinds of knowledge--propositional and procedural--necessary for knowing, Harris argues that tutoring produces an essential form of procedural knowledge that cannot be fully exported from center to institution, a form of learning that would be readily available to students only through a writing center even in a transformed institution:

> Helping students get the "feel" of some aspects of writing is part of what a tutor can do as she sits next to the student, talking, modeling, and offering suggestions, even though writing is a more sophisticated activity than any of these. . . . This may seem obvious because it is what tutors often do in a tutorial, but it can startle a student as he suddenly "sees" what he's supposed to do in order to achieve whatever it was he was trying to achieve. . . . [This strategic knowledge is experiential, a knowing through application or rehearsal of theoretical knowledge.] The rehearsal by some students may go well on their own, but it may not for others. That rehearsal enacted with a tutor watching and offering feedback and advice is a particularly effective tutorial practice. Strategies are easy to learn in

> an environment where the person next to the writer can answer questions as the writer proceeds and can offer some midstream correction or encouragement when something is not going well. (33-34)
>
> Writing centers may still have to contend with a diminishing minority who view them as unnecessary frills, sucking up funds, space, and personnel to duplicate what goes on in the classroom or to coddle remedial students who shouldn't have been admitted in the first place, but as we turn our attention to the work of the tutor, we become increasingly aware that writing instruction without a writing center is only a partial program, lacking essential activities students need in order to grow and mature as writers. (40)

Harris's view of the writing center is not one where institutional realities necessarily turn idealizations into unattainable illusions. Different as the directions North and Harris take may be, both are rooted in much the same idealization of the writing center. Taken together, these essays should prompt us to think anew about what we are truly about in writing centers.

Doing so, however, requires us to become less rigid--or perhaps just less defensive--in our advocacy of our idealizations of the writing center. We need to be less swift to judge adaptations to special circumstances as prima facie evidence of the abandonment of ideals. In her response to North's "Revisiting" essay, Cynthia Haynes-Burton very rightly decries the excessively negative tone of the essay, but her assessment of North's particular adaptation to circumstances sounds very much like a ringing defense of the inviolable ideal against the threat of erosive adaptation:

> It seems to me that his tone is defeatist. I had expected him to say that not much has changed since that article first appeared, that only in local struggles like his, can writing centers move into an arena where institutions no longer bring out the sacrificial scapegoat when a victim is needed in literacy politics. I expected him to encourage writing centers to work toward gaining more institutional power, not to retreat to a service-oriented mentality, and to service only the motivated students of *his* choice at that (i.e.,

the students signed up for the courses in his revamped writing program). (182-83)

But Haynes-Burton rightly points out that one of North's most important points, a point she "applauds"(181), is lost among the discouraging points in his revisiting essay. That important point is North's recognition that "institutional arrangements seem to me too idiosyncratic, and writing centers' political visions too varied, for me to tell you where I think "we"--all writing center people--are going"(15).

How can writing centers meet the needs of our students and institutions in a manner consistent with our ideals? In her call for more research and stronger emphasis on theory, Nancy Grimm admonishes us to avoid talking only to ourselves, to broaden the conversation to include English departments and other faculty and administrators. We are not likely, however, to find answers to our questions in dialogue with English departments, valuable as such dialogue would surely prove. English departments unfortunately have yet to face similar questions regarding their own responsibilities. Nor are we likely to find answers in talking to ourselves, at least to ourselves as theorists or as writing center professionals. But we may begin to find answers and the basis for more theory in informed practice, especially by talking an listening to those caught in the middle between theory and the daily demands made on them: our tutors. Sadly, Grimm's theoretical broader conversation, as played out at NCTE, CCCC, and the recent NWCA conferences, too often ignores these key players in our writing center operation.

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